

Using Public Relations Strategies to Advocate for Gifted Programming in Your School

by Kevin Besnoy

THE CURRENT TREND OF CUTTING and slashing funding for gifted education from state budgets is a call to action for all educators of the gifted. This watershed moment must be addressed with a proactive grassroots vision because the greatest effects will be felt at the most basic level: the local schools. Sternberg (1996) warned that cutting a program is much easier when few supporters advocate for its existence. Thus, in order to stem the tide of the reduction of gifted education services, educators of the gifted must become advocates and employ public relations strategies within their own school buildings.

An advocate is a person who promotes a cause or group of people (Berger, 1990). Lewis and Karnes (2001) defined educational public relations as a systematic, continuous program that uses interpersonal relations and mass communications to promote and gain support for education. Teachers of the gifted are excellent advocates for gifted education. They understand the characteristics of gifted students and the virtues of gifted programming. In addition, through everyday interactions with their colleagues, they can informally discuss the need for gifted programming and ascertain their colleagues' general perception of it.

Why Be an Advocate or Use Public Relations to Promote Gifted Education?

All teachers who work with high-ability students must establish advocacy and public relations strategies for their program (Bisland, 2003; Renzulli & Reis, 1991). Articles have been written detailing how to advocate at the district (Herzog, 2003), state (Robinson & Moon, 2003), and national levels (Corn, 1999). These articles have detailed how to work with media, school officials, and business leaders to promote gifted education.

However, gifted educators now need to advocate for gifted programming at the local school level. They must be willing to reach out to their colleagues within their school building through a systematic, continuous program to gather support for gifted programming. By becoming advocates and public relations strategists for the program within their own school, teachers of the gifted will help to promote the merits of gifted programming and remove the perception of elitism held by many professionals who are not involved in gifted education (Karnes, Lewis, & Stephens, 1999; Kiger, 1998).

In order for gifted students to maximize their potential, gifted and general education teachers must meet their unique needs. Unfortunately, many general education teachers, administrators, and others outside the realm of gifted education have not been exposed to the issues surrounding gifted education. Copenhaver and McIntyre (1992) surveyed 85 elementary and secondary teachers to determine their exposure to and understanding of gifted education. The researchers determined that 46 of the surveyed teachers

(54%) had no experience in gifted education and 28 (33%) had never taken a class or workshop on gifted education. For this reason, gifted education teachers must be more vocal with the purpose of facilitating greater exposure to gifted programming. Advocating for gifted students and programming within the school building can help to promote a greater understanding of gifted students and their education. In fact, Kiger (1998) maintained that teachers outside of gifted education will become more amenable to gifted programs if exposed to issues surrounding gifted education.

An appropriate education is one that identifies students' educational needs and then provides a curriculum that addresses those needs (Benbow & Stanley, 1996). All students, even those identified as gifted, deserve a personalized education. However, many educators outside gifted education believe that "giftedness" is a fancy label and that gifted students do not need a special curriculum. These educators feel that, because of their precocious intellectual ability, gifted students are capable of satisfying their own needs without specialized attention. This belief is simply untrue and is, in fact, harmful to the educational growth of the child. Kiger (1998) argued that gifted education should not be viewed as a label, but rather as a necessary service. By being an effective advocate and public relations strategist for gifted



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programming within the school building, teachers of the gifted will raise awareness of the need of gifted education.

General Advocacy/ Public Relations Strategies

Effective advocates are good public relations strategists. In fact, Karnes et al. (1999) argued that you cannot be an advocate for gifted education without developing a public relations strategy. However, being an effective advocate is not always easy. A major obstacle to creating a good public relations strategy to use within the school is the time to plan it. Public relations

campaigns are not created overnight and require cooperation from many people. Frequently, great ideas fail because they are too elaborate and require too much work. Thus, it is advisable to start slow the first year (perhaps one activity each grading period) and then add an activity each subsequent year. Remember that creating a quality public

relations strategy is far less intimidating than it appears.

According to Lewis and Karnes (2001), there are three general media that should be used for public relations: nonprint media, print media, and other media. Various activities can be created using these three categories that will help advocates promote their gifted program. Examples of these media outside the school building are easy to find, but teachers of the gifted should realize that examples exist in the school building, as well. Examples of nonprint media available in the school building include the intercom, word of mouth by students, and collaboration with colleagues (see Table 1). Examples of print media available in the school building include bulletin boards, Web sites, and the school newspaper (see Table 2). Examples of other media available in the school building include offering assistance, students' performances, and school display cases (see Table 3).

Karnes et al. (1999) developed a step-by-step process for creating a public relations campaign to use at the district or state level that can be adapted for the local school level.

Table 1

Sources of Schoolwide Nonprint Media

Other Sources	Example
Intercom	Morning and afternoon announcements can be used to promote any activity.
Word of mouth by students	Gifted students need to be able to discuss with their teachers and peers what they are doing in the gifted classes. Far too often, they describe what they did as "played games" or "had fun."
Collaboration with colleagues	Collaborating with school colleagues allows the teacher of the gifted to demonstrate how to teach to gifted students' unique needs. Additionally, it will help to promote the need for gifted programming.

Note. Adapted from "Public Relations and Advocacy for the Gifted," by J. D. Lewis & F. A. Karnes, in *Methods and Materials for Teaching the Gifted* (pp. 635–672), ed. by F. A. Karnes & S. M. Bean, 2001, Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Table 2

Sources of Schoolwide Print Media

Other Sources	Example
Bulletin Board	The gifted students should be responsible for a bulletin board in the school that highlights accomplishments of any student or class.
School Web site	Creating a school Web site or helping to manage the existing Web site is an excellent method of promoting all of the school's programs.
School Newspaper/newsletter	The school newspaper/newsletter should not focus on the accomplishments of the gifted program; rather, it should be used as a tool to promote the entire school.

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The first step in creating your public relations campaign is to develop a message or purpose. Examples of messages for a schoolwide public relations strategy regarding gifted education include (a) promoting the virtues of a gifted program, (b) effecting change so that the needs of gifted students are met in the regular classroom, and (c) increasing the awareness of those outside gifted

education of the characteristics of gifted students (Karnes et al., 1999). An organized, precise, and catchy message will help attract fellow educators and increase interest in gifted education.

The second step is creating objectives that will guide your campaign. The main objective for any schoolwide public relations campaign is to gather support for the school's gifted

program. However, when creating campaign objectives, teachers of the gifted need to be realistic. Remember: "Rome wasn't built in a day." In order to deliver the desired message and reach the objective, teachers of the gifted must be willing to take the first step. They must reach out to all school personnel, including teachers, administrators, and support staff, to show them how gifted programming

Table 3**Other Media Sources Available in the School Building**

Other Sources	Example
Offering Assistance	There are several events that take place throughout the school year. Inquire how gifted students can assist with any of these events.
Student Performances	One way to promote the gifted program and raise money at the same time is for gifted students to put on a play or some other type of performance.
School Display Cases	Gifted students could be responsible for keeping one of the school's display cases up to date.

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is beneficial to the entire school, not just a select few.

Step three is producing specific activities for your target audience. The general school population consists of several subgroups, including general education teachers, specialists (e.g., librarian, computer lab teacher, art teacher, reading specialist, physical education teacher), administrators, cafeteria staff, custodial staff, and secretaries. In order to reach their objective successfully, teachers of the gifted must create different activities that address the functions of each subgroup.

The fourth step is creating a timeline to ensure that activities are focused and in a logical order. Additionally, it is important to allow a reasonable amount of time to complete each planned activity. To ensure the timeliness of each event, each activity should be planned based on the school calendar. For instance, keep in mind the dates of statewide tests, traditional holiday concerts, and traditional school events to help determine how the gifted program can be of assistance.

The final step is evaluation. Just like any good lesson plan, a public relations campaign must have spe-

cific, measurable objectives. Teachers need to determine how they are going to measure if the objective has been met, and they need to create a method of recording progress of each activity and the campaign as a whole. Throughout the duration of the campaign, teachers need to record which activities were and were not successful for a final analysis.

By following these five steps, any teacher of the gifted can expect to have an organized public relations campaign. Still, Karnes et al. (1999) warned that tactics should be selected that are suitable for the intended audience.

Examples of Strategies to Use Within the School Building

As stated above, the main purpose of advocating for gifted education programming is to gather support for it. Thus, the first step in any campaign is to gather support from all personnel who work within the school building. In order to achieve this purpose, identify subgroups within the school and create appropriate activities.

Example of Public Relations With General Education Teachers

In many instances, general education teachers view teaching gifted students as easy and not fundamental to the general educational process. They believe that gifted students will get what they need without any additional help. The fact that gifted students get special services leads many teachers to resent gifted programs. For example, general education teachers see that gifted students leave the classroom for a few hours at a time to work on material that has nothing to do with the regular curriculum. Upon the students' return, the teacher must then make sure that the gifted students get caught up with the rest of the class. This could lead to frustration for the teacher if he or she does not have a good understanding of the gifted education program (Troxclair & Karnes, 1997).

This negative opinion can serve as a springboard for a series of public relations activities. The objective of these activities would be easing the resentment that a general education teacher might have for gifted education.

One activity might include teachers of the gifted offering their assistance with creating a unit that addresses the instructional levels of all students, not just the gifted students. Rather than always pulling the gifted student out of the general classroom, teachers of the gifted might agree to go into the general classroom a couple of times to help with the implementation of the unit. After analyzing the results of a pretest, lesson plans should be written for the general education classroom and gifted education classroom that reflect the instructional needs of all students. Through collaboration, the general education teacher will gain insight about how to differentiate the curriculum for gifted students. When creating a timeline for such an activity, it is advisable to approach the general education teacher at least one entire grading period ahead of time so that a specific timeline can be developed that will be more than satisfactory to both teachers.

Evaluation of this activity is required of both teachers. Questions to ask include the following: How effectively did the activity gather support for gifted education? Did the teacher of the gifted change the general education teacher's perception of gifted education? Did the general education teacher gain any new insight into the needs of gifted students? What did the teacher of the gifted gain from the experience? How did the gifted teacher's views of the general education classroom change?

Example of Public Relations With Specialists

Another group of school-based educators to target for public relations activities are the specialists in the building, such as the librarian, art teacher, technology coordinator, read-

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ing specialist, or physical education teacher. These educators are great resources for special projects that can be used to promote any gifted program. A good way to approach this subgroup is to inquire how the gifted education program can aid the specialists with a project.

One project idea is to ask the school librarian if the gifted program can help to promote National Library Week (generally held sometime in early April). The objective of this activity would be to increase awareness of the unique needs of gifted students and the necessity of gifted program-

ming. The teacher and librarian could create a unit that requires each student to research historical facts about the library so they can serve as tour guides. In an elementary school, the older gifted students could serve as library mentors for the younger students in the school. They could have a reading corner, produce flyers, or design a bulletin board. When creating a timeline for this activity, it is advisable to approach the librarian several months prior to National Library week. This would also be a great opportunity to include the students in the planning of an event.

Another example of a project is collaborating with the technology coordinator on creating or maintaining the school's Web site. The objective of this activity would be for the gifted students to promote all the activities taking place at the school. Students would require instruction in Web page design and management, thus requiring the teacher of the gifted and technology coordinator to collaborate. Things to consider when creating a timeline for this activity include, but are not limited to, (a) teaching students how to create and maintain Web pages, (b) gathering information about all the activities taking place in the school building, and (c) keeping the information on the Web site current. The last consideration is important because keeping a Web site current can be a time-consuming process.

Evaluation of these activities is required by both the specialists and the gifted education teacher. Questions to ask include the following: Did this activity effectively gather support for the school's gifted education program? What did the specialist learn about gifted students? What did the specialist learn about the school's gifted education pro-

gram? What did the gifted education teacher learn about the specialist?

Example of Public Relations With Administration

Another group of school-based educators to target for public relations activities is the administration. The administration's view of gifted education goes a long way in promoting the effectiveness of the school's gifted program.

One way to approach this subgroup is to invite one or more of the administrators to take part in the culminating activity of a unit of study. The objective of this activity would be to demonstrate to the administration that gifted students have unique needs that can be met by a gifted education program.

For example, this might be accomplished through a historical role-play of former Presidents. As a class project, each student would research different aspects of the Presidency (e.g., historical perspectives, assassinations, wartime Presidents, momentous events, or how the Presidency has changed through the years). Additionally, each student would select a former President to research and assume the role of that President at a Presidential luncheon where the administrator would be the guest of honor and the students would dress up as their specific Presidents and present their research.

This activity might be conducted in collaboration with general education students, as well. Role-playing (including costumes) provides information through visual and auditory means, which increases the retention of information. Moreover, the greater exposure to gifted activities one has, the more active one becomes to supporting gifted programming.

When creating a timeline for this activity, the teacher of the gifted should consider President's Day as a time to hold the luncheon. Although sending a formal invitation to the administrators would be a nice touch, the prudent thing to do would be to discuss a suitable date with the administrator several months in advance. The gifted students should be included in the planning of the luncheon.

Both the gifted education teacher and the administrator need to evaluate this activity. Questions to ask include: How did this activity effectively gather support for the school's gifted program? What did the administrator learn about teaching gifted students? What did the administrator learn about gifted students? What did the teacher of the gifted learn about the school's administration?

Year-End Evaluation

A fundamental purpose for evaluation is to document the effectiveness of the gifted program (Hunsaker, 2000). Therefore, at the end of each year, teachers of the gifted should also evaluate the progress made in advocating for gifted programming. Additionally, a formal evaluation will serve as an indicator for the gifted education teacher as to what areas need to be addressed the following year (see Appendix A).

Final Thoughts

Now is the time for gifted education teachers to advocate for gifted education in their school buildings. By creating a public relations campaign that systematically targets various school-based subgroups, teachers of the gifted can promote the idea that gifted programming is a valuable

asset. Furthermore, they will help to ensure the future of gifted education for those students who need it. *CCT*

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Appendix A

End-of-the-Year Public Relations Activity Evaluation Form

Name of activity: _____

Date of activity: _____

- What were the objectives of the activity in which you participated and were they met?
- What did the gifted education teacher do to facilitate the completion of the activity?
- What were your impressions of gifted education prior to participation in this activity?
- How did this activity change your opinions of gifted education?
- What could the gifted education program do to improve your opinions of gifted education?
- What suggestions do you have for another collaborative project to complete with the gifted education program?
- What will you do to help support the school's gifted education program next year?